

Prioritisation and Sequencing of Council Mandates: Walking the Walk?



A wide view of the Security Council chamber ahead of a 25 September 2019 meeting. (UN Photo/Manuel Elias)

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Executive Summary

The Security Council, the UN Secretariat and external assessments have emphasised how better prioritisation and sequencing of Council mandates could contribute to the effectiveness of peace operations. Building on examples from several peace operations—including peacekeeping and special political missions—this report identifies the obstacles that the Council and the Secretariat face in applying these concepts. While acknowledging the structural challenges, the report makes recommendations that would pave the way for incremental changes in how the Council, the Secretariat and field missions approach the mandating process.

The report finds that the examples analysed do not show a clear trend towards greater prioritisation and sequencing. Moreover, the potential for greater prioritisation and sequencing to shape more effective implementation has been insufficiently explored. Although ten of the 17 peace operations whose mandates are renewed regularly by the Council articulate some sort of prioritisation within their tasks, the meaning of this concept remains unclear. The report provides elements for a definition of both concepts. On the one hand, a prioritisation effort has to be clear as to the strategic objectives of the operation, focus on a limited number of tasks and be able to anticipate

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the future inclusion (and funding) of revised priorities based on the evolution of the conflict and the judgment of the mission. On the other hand, a sequencing effort should determine a logical progression of the mandate through time, ensuring its adequacy to address the situation on the ground. In order to be effective, this progression needs to be laid out initially in line with the strategic guidance of the Council, but with sufficient flexibility to be adjusted over time.

The Secretariat, the Council and member states should aim to define these concepts

in their own terms, and re-evaluate their usefulness. One of the most difficult issues remains resolving the tension between mandate content that is politically acceptable to key stakeholders, and content which is operationally necessary. Addressing these routine dynamics at play in the current mandating system requires the Secretariat to provide genuinely frank advice and the Council to devote most of its attention, when negotiating mandates, to endorsing the strategic direction for the mission.

What is Prioritisation and Sequencing? Theory and Practice

The need to design clear, credible and achievable mandates—a precursor to recommendations for mandate prioritisation and sequencing—has long featured in peacekeeping discussions: as early as 2000, the report of the Panel on UN Peace Operations, which was chaired by Lakhdar Brahimi, expressed concern at the credibility and achievability of Council mandates, particularly their provisions on protection of civilians. The high expectations that these create, the report argued, establishes a potentially large mismatch between the objective and the resources available to meet it.

In 2015, the report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) observed that mandates had become lengthier, more specific and prescriptive, and at times less realistic, manageable and achievable. It maintained that “too often, mandates and missions are produced on the basis of templates instead of tailored to support situation-specific political strategies”¹. The Secretariat and the Council had been unable to overcome the challenges posed by so-called “Christmas-tree mandates”, overloaded with too many disparate tasks. This, the HIPPO report noted, was influenced by the lack of restraint of Council members—and those lobbying them—in pushing specific issues without due consideration given to the prospects of

success in performing certain mandated tasks. “Sequenced and prioritised mandates”, the report concluded, “will allow missions to develop over time rather than trying to do everything at once, and failing”².

In a 25 November 2015 presidential statement, the Council declared its willingness to pursue more prioritisation when evaluating, mandating and reviewing peace operations and to consider sequenced and phased mandates, where appropriate, when evaluating existing UN peace operations or establishing new ones.³ However, the Council has not followed through systematically on its stated intention.

At a Council open debate on 28 March 2018, Secretary-General António Guterres announced the launch of “Action for Peacekeeping” (A4P), an initiative aimed at renewing states’ political commitment to peacekeeping operations. Guterres urged Council members to put an end to mandates that look like “Christmas trees”, arguing that the UN Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS) could not possibly implement its 209 mandated tasks. “By attempting too much, we dilute our efforts and weaken our impact,” he said.⁴

The clearest and most recent support by member states for mandates that respond to concerns expressed in reports from Brahimi through HIPPO is found in the Declaration of Shared Commitments, whose

1 S/2015/446, Report of the High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO), 17 June 2015, p.9

2 Ibid., p.10

3 S/PRST/2015/22, 25 November 2015, p.3

4 S/PV.8218, 28 March 2018, p.3

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development was led by the UN Secretariat and endorsed by 152 member states and four organisations. It includes the commitment “to provide clear, focused, sequenced, prioritized and achievable mandates by the Security Council matched by appropriate resources; to seek measures to enable greater coherence between mandates and resources; and to support the implementation of Security Council resolutions through bilateral and multilateral engagements”.⁵

The Declaration also includes the Secretariat’s commitment to propose parameters to the Council for the sequencing and prioritisation of mandates. Although the concepts of prioritisation and sequencing are often discussed together—arguably a sequenced mandate has to be based on certain priorities—what follows is an attempt to break down their main characteristics.

The sequencing of Council mandates

The Brahimi report considered the issue of sequencing purely in respect of troop deployment to peacekeeping missions. It argued for mandates to be sequenced in the initial stages of mission establishment to allow the Secretariat to identify troops for deployment, and that the Council keep in draft form any mandating resolution that contemplated a sizeable force until the Secretary-General was able to confirm that such commitments had been received. The report warned against deploying partial forces incapable of solidifying a fragile peace, which “would first raise and then dash the hopes of a population engulfed in conflict or recovering from war and damage the credibility of the UN as a whole”.⁶

The 2009/2010 New Horizon reform initiative also identified the criticality of a sequenced roll-out in the context of the deployment of a new UN peacekeeping mission, looking beyond the issue of troop availability. According to the UN document “Charting a New Horizon for UN Peacekeeping”, a sequenced mission roll-out “would enable mission leaders, planners and support systems to respond faster to

immediate priorities” and develop more accurate longer-term budget projections of mandate implementation costs.⁷ The document warned that a sequenced roll-out must not lead to partial implementation of mandates, however, and that it would work only if there is a commitment by the Council and the Fifth Committee regarding the availability of resources for the second phase of deployment.

The HIPPO report proposed a broader two-stage, sequenced mandating process. Its recommendation was aimed at helping design more effective, situation-specific missions with realistic, streamlined and prioritised tasks. It advocated establishing “an initial mandate with an overall political goal, a limited number of initial priority tasks and an explicit planning mandate that requests the Secretary-General to return within six months with a proposal for sequenced activities based on a limited number of achievable benchmarks for mission performance”. This would allow for an initial presence on the ground, with time for consultations with the host government, civil society and, to the extent possible, parties to the conflict, and for the development of detailed assessments with partners. Secretariat proposals would need to be prioritised on the basis of “a realistic assessment of political commitments, the comparative advantage of UN peace operations and others, the conditions on the ground and realistic prospects of success”⁸, according to HIPPO, with the initial proposals then being adjusted in light of available capabilities and resources, as well as discussions among the Council, TCCs/PCCs and the Secretariat to forge a common understanding about the mission, “ideally in a fairly informal and interactive format”⁹.

Prioritised and sequenced mandates featured prominently in a briefing by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that the UK organised on 20 November 2015, at which the Secretary-General presented his HIPPO implementation report and endorsed the recommendations regarding sequenced mandates. The Council adopted a presidential

statement on 25 November 2015, declaring its willingness to pursue more prioritisation and to consider sequenced and phased mandates, where appropriate.¹⁰

The Council has embraced the notion of sequencing in principle, but has found it difficult to apply to existing missions. While no new UN peacekeeping operation has been established since 2015, sequenced approaches are evident in the design of the UN Mission in Colombia in 2016 and its 2017 successor, the UN Verification Mission, both Special Political Missions (SPMs).¹¹

The prioritisation of Council mandates

The clearest statement of the importance of prioritisation is found in the HIPPO report: namely, that Council mandates should have “fewer priorities, fewer tasks and better sequencing”.¹² The report advocated for the field to lead on the review of mandates, major course corrections or shifts in mission strategy and concepts of operations. A sound prioritisation should emerge as part of the two-stage sequenced approach described above. The HIPPO report called on the Council to resist the inclusion of tasks in mandates unless founded upon a clear and convincing rationale, justified by well-identified needs and the feasibility of timely implementation. It warned against those recommendations from the Secretary-General that reflect an arbitrage of departmental interests rather than genuine prioritisation. The report stated that for many important issues, “the conditions may not be right in the initial phase of a mission, and consequently sequenced and prioritised approaches are necessary to respond to needs on the ground at an opportune stage”.¹³

As mentioned, in recent years the Council has embraced, at least rhetorically, the need to prioritise tasks within the mandates it has authorised. Of the 17 current peace operations whose mandates are renewed regularly, ten articulate what Council members identify as some sort of prioritisation among their tasks. Six lay out specifically what the Council considers strategic objectives for the operation, sometimes in very broad terms.

5 Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations, available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a4p-declaration-en.pdf>

6 S/2000/809, Report of the Panel on the UN Peace Operations (also known as the Brahimi Report), 21 August 2000, p.11

7 A New Partnership Agenda. Charting a New Horizon for UN Peacekeeping, July 2009, p.19

8 S/2015/446, HIPPO Report, 17 June 2015, p.60

9 Ibid., p.61

10 S/PRST/2015/22, 25 November 2015, p.3

11 See page 11 below for a full description.

12 S/2015/446, HIPPO Report, 17 June 2015, p.52

13 Ibid., p.60

What is Prioritisation and Sequencing? Theory and Practice

MISSION	HOW ARE OBJECTIVES ARTICULATED?	HOW ARE REFERENCES TO PRIORITISATION ARTICULATED?
MINUSCA	Decides that MINUSCA's strategic objective is to support the creation of the political, security and institutional conditions conducive to the sustainable reduction of the presence of, and threat posed by, armed groups through a comprehensive approach and proactive and robust posture without prejudice to the basic principles of peacekeeping (S/RES/2448, op.36).	Division between priority (S/RES/2448, op.39) and other tasks (S/RES/2448, op.40) "bearing in mind that these [...] are mutually reinforcing". Furthermore, the mandate identifies additional tasks (S/RES/2448, op.41).
MINUSMA	Decides that the primary strategic priority of MINUSMA remains to support the implementation of the [2015 Peace and Reconciliation] Agreement... and further decides that the second strategic priority of MINUSMA is to facilitate the implementation of a comprehensive politically-led Malian strategy to protect civilians, reduce intercommunal violence, and re-establish State authority, State presence and basic social services in Central Mali (S/RES/2480, op. 20).	Division between priority tasks (op.28) and, without impeding on its capacity to implement its priority tasks, MINUSMA is authorised to use its existing capacities to assist in implementing two "other tasks in a streamlined and sequenced manner, bearing in mind that priority and secondary tasks are mutually reinforcing" (S/RES/2480, op.29).
MONUSCO	The strategic priorities of MONUSCO are to contribute to two objectives: the protection of civilians and support to the stabilisation and strengthening of State institutions in the DRC and key governance and security reforms (S/RES/2463, op. 23). These objectives are further specified in op.29 (i) and (ii).	Division between priority (S/RES/2463, op.29) and other tasks (S/RES/2463, op.30), the latter to be pursued "in a streamlined and sequenced manner, and in support of the [Mission's] strategic priorities".
UNAMID	Recalls the two-pronged approach supported in resolution 2363, which focuses on military protection, explosive remnants of war clearance and emergency relief in the Jebel Marra area and, in other areas of Darfur where there has not been recent fighting, an approach that focuses on stabilising the situation, supporting the police and helping to build rule of law institutions whilst continuing to protect civilians, mediating intercommunal conflict and following up on security sector reform-related issues (S/RES/2429, op. 2).	Follows up on the recommendation of an AU-UN Special Report and decides that UNAMID has three redefined strategic priorities (S/RES/2429, op. 11).
UNIFIL	The Council calls for Israel and Lebanon to support a permanent ceasefire and a long-term solution based on several principles and elements (S/RES/1701, op. 8).	The resolution includes language "bearing in mind the strategic priorities and recommendations" identified by the Secretary-General following two review processes (in 2012 and 2017), but these are not spelled out (S/RES/2433, pp.24)
UNSMIL	Decides to extend the mandate of UNSMIL to exercise mediation and good offices to support: (S/RES/2434, op.1): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an inclusive political process and security and economic dialogue; • continued implementation of the Libyan Political Agreement; • consolidation of the governance, security and economic arrangements of the Government of National Accord; • subsequent phases of the Libyan transition process, including the constitutional process and the organisation of elections 	In addition to the mediation and good offices mandate in op.1, the Council further decides that UNSMIL, within operational and security constraints, should also undertake five other tasks (S/RES/2434, op.2).
UNMISS	N/A	The resolution emphasises that protection of civilians must be given priority in decisions about the use of available capacity and resources within the mission (S/RES/2459, op.14).
UNAMA	N/A	The resolution outlines the mandate of UNAMA "with a particular focus on [six] priorities" (S/RES/2405, op. 6) and three additional priority areas in coordination with UN Agencies, Funds and Programmes (S/RES/2405, op. 7).

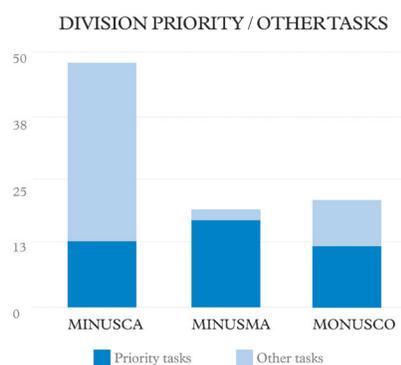
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MISSION	HOW ARE OBJECTIVES ARTICULATED?	HOW ARE REFERENCES TO PRIORITISATION ARTICULATED?
UNAMI	N/A	UNAMI shall prioritise the provision of advice, support, and assistance to the Government and people of Iraq on advancing inclusive, political dialogue and national and community-level reconciliation (S/RES/2470, op. 2).
UNIOGBIS	N/A	<p>The Council endorses the Secretary-General's recommendations regarding the reconfiguration of UNIOGBIS and the reprioritisation of its tasks according to three phases: (S/RES/2458, op 2):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phase I (electoral phase) • Phase II (post-electoral phase) • Phase III (transition phase) <p>The Council requests UNIOGBIS to focus, in particular, on three priorities (S/RES/2458, op 5) and assist, coordinate and lead international efforts in five areas (S/RES/2458, op 6).</p>

The ways in which task-prioritisation attempts have been carried out differ greatly and illustrate the absence of a commonly-agreed definition of this concept. In some cases, prioritisation is explicit. The mandates of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (MONUSCO), and MINUSMA all differentiate between sets of priority tasks and other tasks that are “mutually reinforcing”. These mandates include references to the implementation of secondary tasks as long as they do not impede the mission’s capacity to implement priority tasks (MINUSMA), and request the Secretary-General to reflect the prioritisation in the deployment of the mission and to align budgetary resources accordingly (MONUSCO and MINUSCA). However, despite being explicit, they are not always clear. The mandate of MINUSCA, for example, differentiates among priority, other and additional tasks, without explaining the different expectations of each. In other cases, the references to priorities are more general. For example, although the UNMISS mandate emphasises that protection of civilians must be given priority in decisions about the use of available capacity and resources within the mission, beyond this assertion, no hierarchical order

of tasks is specified in the resolution. While prioritisation provides useful guidance to the mission leadership, retaining most mission tasks, even as secondary, fails to address the problem posed by “Christmas-tree mandates”.

The table below shows the division between priority and the rest of the tasks identified in the mandates of three peace operations.¹⁴



Two objectives considered a priority in several peace operations are support to the political process and protection of civilians. The political and operational challenges associated with both these general objectives were already foreseen in the Brahimi report. In many operations where providing support to the political process is a key priority, the UN is not in the driver’s seat, which not only hands the mission an objective it

cannot accomplish by itself, but also links its performance to decisions primarily taken elsewhere. As closely as some of the regional and subregional actors may work with UN mediators on, say, the Central African Republic or South Sudan, their differences may be substantial on critical issues, including accountability and human rights. The Brahimi report described how often the Secretariat “found itself required to execute mandates that were developed elsewhere [by non-UN peacemakers] and delivered to it via the Security Council with but minor changes”.¹⁵

On the protection of civilians, the Brahimi report, written in the wake of critical protection failures in Rwanda and Bosnia-Herzegovina, expressed concerns about the credibility and achievability of blanket protection of civilians mandates in contexts where UN peacekeepers could not protect more than a small fraction of civilians, “even if directed to do so”.¹⁶ This potentially large mismatch between objective and capacities remains today. Regarding MONUSCO and MINUSCA, the Secretariat has repeatedly raised concerns about the gap between mandate and resources. The 2017 strategic review emphasised the impact of budgetary reductions on MONUSCO’s capabilities to implement its protection mandate in a country roughly the size of Western Europe, where state actors are often as much of a

¹⁴ For comparison purposes, the tasks considered are those identified by the Council as priorities. Many of those can be subdivided into more concrete tasks at the operational level.

¹⁵ S/2000/809, Brahimi Report, 21 August 2000, p.10

¹⁶ Ibid., p.11

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threat to the population as the armed groups they are supposed to combat.¹⁷ MONUSCO has acknowledged the limits of what it can achieve in terms of physical protection, which resulted in a shift towards protection through early warning, prevention and, where required, the projection of military force. However, most Council resolutions add no qualifiers to the protection of civilians-related language in mandating resolutions, contributing to outsized expectations.

Despite the challenges in achieving these objectives, support to the political process and protection of civilians continue to be core elements of peace operations.

In addition to the prioritisation of thematic tasks, peace operations are sometimes tasked to prioritise some activities within particular geographical areas in their theatre of operations. The deployment of MONUSCO's Force Intervention Brigade in eastern DRC in 2013, the authorisation of a Juba-based Regional Protection Force in UNMISS in August 2016 and narrowing-down the focus of UNAMID's operations to Jebel Marra in 2018 are decisions, formalised in resolutions, giving the senior leadership of the mission direction on the Council's main geographic priorities and providing a way to sort broad mandated tasks.

A general call for clarity and achievability

Permeating the proposals for prioritised and sequenced mandates is a call for overall clarity and precise direction. Referring to the complexity of the tasks assigned to peace operations as they evolved beyond traditional peacekeeping into multidimensional missions, the Brahimi report also noted the difficulties of accomplishing their objectives. Most failures of the UN have occurred, it said, because the Council and member states “crafted and supported ambiguous, inconsistent and under-funded mandates and then stood back and watched as they failed, sometimes even adding critical public commentary as the credibility of the UN underwent its severest tests”.¹⁸ The report advocated for mandates that reflected “the clarity that peacekeeping operations require for unity of effort when they deploy into potentially dangerous

situations”, urging the Council to refrain from sending an operation into danger with unclear instructions. The report also famously emphasised the particular responsibility of the Secretariat in telling the Security Council “what it needs to know, not what it wants to hear” about peace operations.¹⁹

The New Horizon report reiterated that clear and achievable mandates are the foundation of an effective mission strategy and concluded that although Council members had worked “to provide clearer and more precise direction to UN peacekeeping operations... mission tasks have proliferated”.²⁰ The report differentiated between strategic direction, which is critical for mission planning, and the inclusion of too many detailed tasks, which can end up obscuring the overall objectives of the operations. The notion of strategic clarity should not be conflated with excessive focus on detail, which can be detrimental to the clarity of the text.

Although notions such as clarity, achievability, consistency and adaptability are highlighted in discussions of peace operations' mandates, prioritisation and sequencing efforts are unlikely to achieve those single-handedly.

Elements for a definition

From the examples above, it seems clear that support in principle for prioritisation and sequencing of mandates has not been matched by an effort by the Secretariat and the Council to define these concepts and identify how they can be used in a more systematic way. Below are two proposed definitions and an explanation of their key elements.

- *A **prioritisation** effort has to take as its starting point clarity on the strategic objectives of the operation, focus on a limited number of areas and be able to anticipate the inclusion of revised priorities based on the evolution of the conflict and the judgment of the mission. A meaningful prioritisation necessarily has to be linked to the allocation of resources.*
- *A **sequencing** effort should determine a logical progression of the mandate through time and ensure its adequacy to address the situation on the ground and its likely evolution. In*

order to be effective, such progression needs to be laid out initially in line with the strategic guidance of the Council, and retain enough flexibility to be adjusted over time.

Focusing on the objectives is critical in peace operations, since it sets their strategic direction. Although the table on page 4 shows an effort to articulate mission objectives in recent years, the main focus of mandates remains the delineation of tasks. To begin to address this, Council members—and others—could insist on discussing with the Secretariat the overall direction of the mission ahead of negotiations on mandate renewals. A more strategic articulation of objectives would spark questions about how every mandated task and mission component supports the achievement of those aims, while avoiding Council micromanagement. This could be a preliminary stage to an eventual shift in mandating practice that stops at the strategic level, defining objectives while leaving the discussion of tasks, or how the objectives will be achieved, to the Secretariat.

Recent attempts at prioritisation have seen the characterisation of almost all mandated tasks as priority tasks. When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. A sound prioritisation effort needs to be clear regarding the criticality of the different tasks, based on a consultative process between the Council and the Secretariat. This means identifying a handful of tasks as priorities according to their relevance at that particular juncture, and being clear about expectations of other, non-priority tasks if they are still included in the mandate. As part of the process to establish the core priorities of the mission, it is important for the Council to understand the interplay among mandated tasks and the implicit tradeoffs. In contexts where peace operations are tasked to support the extension of state authority while brokering agreements involving armed groups, or support the development of state capacities while promoting accountability, the potential for mandate elements to counteract each other should be discussed frankly before their adoption. Other tensions that can arise in mandate implementation may include encouraging local reconciliation

¹⁷ S/2017/826, 29 September 2017, pp.8-9

¹⁸ S/2000/809, Brahimi Report, 21 August 2000, p.44

¹⁹ Ibid., p.12

²⁰ A New Partnership Agenda. Charting a New Horizon for UN Peacekeeping, July 2009, p.10

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efforts while also supporting nation-wide political processes, or how the current push for mobility and agility in peace operations affects the trust that must develop if staff are to deepen their community engagement.

A factor in discussions of mandate prioritisation and sequencing is the potential for some thematic issues, unless specified in detail in mandating resolutions, to be overlooked or deprioritised in the Fifth Committee and even in internal planning

processes. In order to assuage this concern, sensible prioritisation efforts need to anticipate the inclusion of revised priorities (whether new ones or the expansion of old ones) as the mission progresses. While the set of priorities may be limited to a 6-12 month timeframe, the Council could set out a vision beyond mandate expiry, and convey the understanding that it will consider favourably the inclusion of certain tasks at the appropriate time.

For prioritisation and sequencing efforts to be sound, they need to be based on an assessment of needs, adapted to the evolution of the conflict according to the judgment of the mission and the advice from the Secretariat. The Council is an eminently political body and will not always heed Secretariat advice, but the Secretariat has the critical responsibility for developing and communicating the best possible options.

Challenges to Achieve Prioritisation and Sequencing

The dissatisfaction of Council members with Christmas-tree mandates has been a recurring issue discussed in informal settings, as reflected in the takeaways of the Finnish workshop “Hitting the Ground Running”, organised every year for current and incoming Council members. In these discussions the tension is apparent between a formulaic way of looking at peacekeeping operations and an approach tailored to every context. Among the issues members criticised in 2016, for example, were how mandates contain too many tasks that are frequently unrealistic and lack any prioritisation or sequencing. Participants discussed the need to incorporate feedback from the field in the mandating process. Other factors they identified as contributing to the length of mandating resolutions included the particular interest of certain members in specific thematic issues, the weight of agreed language that is easier to carry forward than renegotiate, the insufficiently political character of the texts and the lack of guidance on how to write a good resolution.²¹

Occasionally, heads of peace operations have expressed frustration with the way in which the Council adds to mission mandates. Briefing the Council on 12 February 2010, the Special Representative of the Secretary-General and head of the UN Mission in Liberia, Ellen Margrethe Løj, said: “If new tasks are being continuously added [to the

mandates], the context surrounding the original ones, including the provision of a security umbrella, and the conditions for its transition and exit will become increasingly difficult. If the goal post keeps changing, so to speak, there will be consequences as to when the desired end state can be reached.”²²

Some heads of mission have asked the Council to avoid an excessive focus on detail in mission tasks and leave adequate flexibility in mandates for missions to adapt to shifts on the ground without needing mandate revision. The importance of flexibility has also been raised by member states highlighting the need for “flexible timelines”²³ and “opportunities to make course corrections when things are not working”.²⁴

However, despite criticism of Christmas-tree mandates and endorsement of prioritisation and sequencing, several factors make implementation a challenge.

THE SECURITY COUNCIL

The mandating process and its limitations

The Council’s own working methods can be a hurdle for the emergence of collective thinking and results-based decision-making.²⁵ Among the challenges is the automatic use of the previous mandating resolution as a

starting point for fresh negotiations. The aim is to make agreement on a new resolution easier, politically and practically. In practice, the Council generally adds text and tasks to existing mandates, rather than re-assessing whether all the mission’s tasks still contribute to achieving the strategic objectives defined by the Council. The limited time over which negotiations take place (an average of ten days), and their format (Council members hold one or two rounds in person and negotiations continue bilaterally or over email), encourage text-based discussions rather than strategic thinking.

The Council usually renews mandates annually or every six months. Members have floated the idea of moving beyond such short timeframes and developing a multi-year frame of reference, anticipating the needs of the host country and the projected adjustments over time. This would not necessarily mean longer mandates, but rather a common Council vision for the mission’s strategic direction over the coming few years, adjustable as needed. For now, no concrete initiative has been tabled in this regard.²⁶ Currently, Council members think beyond mandate cycles mainly when mission transition is in sight.

Despite knowing the significant impact that their statements and actions can have on the ground, and the commitment to

21 S/2016/506, 26 May 2016, pp.27-28

22 S/2015/446, HIPPO Report, 17 June 2015, p.60

23 S/PV.8218, March 28, 2018, p.42

24 S/PV.8064, 5 October 2017, p.18

25 For more analysis on the mandating process, please see “Is Christmas Really Over? Improving the Mandating of Peace Operations”, Security Council Report, February 2019.

26 It was proposed in a Dutch-Ivorian draft resolution on mandating negotiated in late 2018, which was ultimately not tabled.

Challenges to Achieve Prioritisation and Sequencing

support the implementation of Security Council resolutions through bilateral and multilateral engagements²⁷, Council members only rarely express much willingness to exert political leverage throughout the lifecycle of peace operations (through visiting missions, press and presidential statements) beyond the critical moment of mandate renewal. In a 1 March 2019 press conference ahead of the Franco-German joint presidencies, Ambassador François Delattre (France) discussed the mandating process and noted that the Council seems to “vote and forget”, moving on immediately to other pressing matters after adopting a new resolution. This is in part a product of the heavy workload of the Council, and its many competing priorities.

The ambivalent role played by penholders

In recent years, the P3 have divided most situation-specific agenda items among themselves, each taking the role of the so-called “penholder”. This informal arrangement, often presented as a way to promote continuity and efficiency, goes beyond the drafting of Council outcomes to include calling for meetings and leading visiting missions. It tends to discourage members from taking initiatives on country situations for which they do not hold the pen, and, when new crises emerge, elected members often expect one of the P3 to take the lead.²⁸ Penholders can be reluctant to acknowledge negative trends in countries within their sphere of influence: until 2013, the US was reluctant to criticise the government of South Sudan, and despite the deterioration of the situation in the centre of Mali starting in 2016, France has continued to prioritise the north of Mali in MINUSMA’s mandate.

Limited insight regarding mandate implementation

Mandating is an eminently political exercise. One of the challenges that Council members encounter when approaching mandate renewals is their limited insight

into how language translates into action. A better understanding of how mandates are implemented could result in restraint by Council members in pushing specific issues without considering how they will be executed. Most Council interaction with mission-based actors is with the head of mission, where discussion usually focuses on political issues rather than operational matters that the mission may be facing. Once a year, the Council is briefed by some heads of military and police components; otherwise, engagement with other mission-based actors is limited. There are near-annual informal meetings with heads of human rights components, as well as regular meetings by the Informal Expert Group on the Protection of Civilians and on Women, Peace and Security, which hold working-level discussions ahead of mandate renewals.

Although the Council’s openness to input from civil society from countries on its agenda has increased, through Arria-formula meetings and in formal briefings and debates, these encounters rarely delve into mandate adjustment discussions.

Among the opportunities for increased exposure to direct perspectives from the field are the visiting missions that the Council carries out regularly. Here, Council members are able to gather first-hand information not only from mission headquarters, but from regional offices as well. In addition to their familiar interlocutors, Council members can hear from the wider mission leadership including the Deputy Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, the Chief of Staff, the Force Commander, the Police Commissioner and section chiefs from the peace operation, in addition to the UN Country Team. Visits can also be carried out by a group of experts sitting in the Council in their national capacity in advance of a mandate renewal. There is no guarantee, however, that the various experts—also from the Fifth Committee and subsidiary organs of the Council—will exchange views or coordinate their recommendations.

MINUSMA: A new stated strategic priority, but without additional capabilities

In 2019, the Council created a second strategic priority for MINUSMA focusing on the situation in the centre of Mali. In particular, MINUSMA was tasked “to facilitate the implementation of a comprehensive politically-led Malian strategy to protect civilians, reduce intercommunal violence, and re-establish State authority, State presence and basic social services in Central Mali”²⁹. The primary strategic priority remained support to the implementation of the 2015 Agreement on Peace and Reconciliation in Mali. Council members had grown increasingly concerned with the deterioration of the situation beyond the north, which was the initial geographic focus of the mission. In late March, the Council’s visiting mission to Mali coincided with the massacre in the village of Ogossagou, central Mali, of 160 Fulani civilians, including women and children, reportedly by Dogon armed elements (Dozos). In June, an apparently retaliatory attack against the Dogon village of Sobane Da in central Mali killed 35 civilians.

This additional priority did not respond to a recommendation of the Secretary-General, but to the positions articulated by Council members. Although France advocated distinguishing between “primary” and “second” strategic priorities to keep the focus in northern Mali, others proposed to have two strategic priorities of equal significance. In the end, the distinction remained. An additional challenge in the implementation of this new priority will be to focus more on the centre while continuing to devote close attention to the north, without additional troops and with fewer resources than those originally proposed by the Secretary-General to the Fifth Committee.

The mirage of linearity

The emphasis on sequencing may reinforce the idea that conflict situations can be approached in a linear way. Categories designating particular sets of tasks—protection of civilians, rule of law, mediation—can be misleading if considered as standalone and self-contained. The categories are useful constructs to discuss complex processes, but their interconnectedness is real, reflecting the breadth of fundamental changes required

27 Declaration of Shared Commitments on UN Peacekeeping Operations, available at <https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a4p-declaration-en.pdf>

28 On 13 November 2018, the E10 and incoming five Council members sent a letter to the Council President emphasising the need for fair burden-sharing and an equal distribution of work among all Council members. In January 2019, several co-penholder arrangements were introduced, including Germany and the UK for Libya sanctions and UNAMID.

29 S/RES/2480, 28 June 2019, p.6

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in host societies for sustainable peace. In reviewing how to mandate peace operations, the Council will have to reconcile the emphasis on sequencing on the supply-side with the need for flexibility on the demand-side. This could also be mitigated by a sharper focus on objectives than on tasks.

Politics often override other considerations

Among the key limitations of the Secretariat's role in soundly advising the Council regarding mandate adjustments is the agency of the Council and its inclination to disregard Secretariat advice if in conflict with political realities. This is further complicated by divisions among Council members regarding peace operations' mandates.

The Secretariat is caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, it is told to be frank and not to bow to concerns about what the market can bear.³⁰ On the other hand, that approach may be unrewarding: the Secretariat has to navigate political divisions in the Council so as not to alienate key stakeholders and provide options that address the divergent Council sensitivities while ensuring that they do not undermine the work of the peace operations. The final decision, always, remains the Council's, which constrains the influence that the Secretariat has in the decision-making process.

Overlooking Secretariat Recommendations: The MONUSCO 2017 Renewal

An example of this dynamic took place when the Council, through resolution 2348, renewed the mandate of MONUSCO on 31 March 2017. The report of the Secretary-General did not recommend any changes to the troop ceiling, and in fact acknowledged that MONUSCO could establish a sufficient military presence in all high-risk areas at once to satisfactorily fulfil its mandate within its existing resources. Furthermore, it recommended increasing the authorised ceiling for the police component from 1,050 to 1,370 personnel in light of the risk of violence related to the upcoming elections.

During negotiations, the UK and the US called for a further decrease in troop levels and a more modest increase of police. France and most other Council members took the view that the situation in the DRC, particularly during the upcoming election period, did not allow for lowering the troop levels.

As the divisions became clear, France, the penholder, proposed to elicit the views of the Secretariat as to the feasibility of further troop reductions. A Secretariat official then told Council members informally that while they stood by maintaining the troop ceiling in accordance with the Secretary-General's report, reducing the actual troop numbers by a further 500 would still allow them to carry out the mandate. In addition, the official suggested that instead of increasing the personnel level of formed police units, the mission could reinforce its police presence through inter-mission cooperation with a temporary deployment from a neighbouring peacekeeping operation.

In the end, resolution 2348 lowered the troop ceiling from 19,815 to 16,215. Actual troop-levels were already almost 3,000 troops under the troop ceiling as a result of prior troop departures, but the new figure still required the mission to remove the equivalent of a full battalion. The resolution also provided for the deployment of additional formed police units via temporary reinforcements from other missions, although these never materialised. Although Council members eventually sought out Secretariat advice informally, they were looking for alternatives to the recommendations originally made by the Secretary-General.

Furthermore, the Council sometimes seeks out the Secretariat as an arbiter and source of options when divisions among its members make it difficult to find a way forward. This became apparent in the Council's consideration of the mandate of MINUSMA in 2019. Following a visiting mission to Mali, it was clear that the US and France had different perspectives on mandate renewal. While all Council members expressed frustration at the pace of implementing the peace agreement, the US advocated significant changes to the mandate whereas France pushed for staying the course in light

of progress in the preceding months and the role that MINUSMA plays in supporting other security presences deployed in Mali and the region. In a 3 April presidential statement, the Council requested the Secretary-General to provide "options for a potential significant adaptation of MINUSMA". The request, which was largely a result of negotiations between France and the US, was made with the stated aim of "enhancing [MINUSMA's] effectiveness to support the implementation of the Agreement through a greater focus on priority tasks, without jeopardizing the stability of Mali and its region, MINUSMA's central role in supporting the implementation of the Agreement, as well as MINUSMA's capacity to interact with other security presences".³¹ In a 31 May report, the Secretary-General advised against any major reduction in the capacity of MINUSMA and stated that he did not recommend any major changes "with regard to the nature of the MINUSMA mandate or the Mission's overall strength".³² The report identified potential changes including the redeployment of 650 personnel and two formed police units and the creation of a quick reaction capability within the mission. In the end, the Council did not significantly modify the mandate, although it added a second strategic priority for the mission regarding the situation in the centre, which was not in the Secretary-General's report.

Efforts by host states to influence internal processes within missions, in the Secretariat, and in the positions of certain member states can also undermine the impact and independence of Secretariat input.³³ For example, the preferences of the Sudanese government significantly shaped UNAMID in 2004. Then-Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations Jean-Marie Guéhenno said that the government of Sudan negotiated the mandate for UNAMID in such a way that "it had ample means to control the pace of transition [from an AU mission to a hybrid UN-AU mission], and to decide whether it wanted the mission to be a success or failure".³⁴

30 S/2015/446, HIPPO Report, 17 June 2015, p.39

31 S/PRST/2019/2, 3 April 2019, p.3

32 S/2019/454, 31 May 2019, p.12

33 For a survey of the impact of host state consent (or lack thereof) in UN peace operations, see Sebastian, Sofia and Gorur, Aditi, UN Peacekeeping and Host-State Consent, Stimson Center, 2018.

34 Guéhenno, Jean-Marie, *The Fog of Peace: A Memoir of International Peacekeeping in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), p.200.

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As shown in the examples above, the Council's prioritisation and sequencing efforts have often been based on guidance from the Secretariat. When this guidance has not been heeded, it has often been as a result of the political interests of one or more key Council members, as opposed to a philosophical disagreement about how to address the conflict most effectively.

UNAMID: The interplay of politics, benchmarks and indicators

Benchmarks and accompanying indicators are often presented as an objective way of assessing the implementation of mandates and of making sure that the Council bases its understanding of a particular situation on information from the ground. However, they are political tools, and tensions between Council members frame the way these are used. As a UN official said, "benchmarks are often used as a fig leaf over a time-based exit".³⁵

In the case of UNAMID, even though the Council laid out in July 2018 the timeline for the mission to exit on 30 June 2020 and liquidate by December 2020, divergences have persisted regarding the transition. In order to react to a proposal of benchmarks and indicators by the Secretary-General, in late 2018 Council members negotiated a presidential statement circulated by the UK. Although the initial draft welcomed the Secretary-General's report and endorsed the benchmarks and indicators contained in it, this endorsement was removed, and ultimately the statement only took note of the report.³⁶ Language was added stating that while some of the proposed benchmarks and indicators are of more immediate priority, others reflect longer-term peacebuilding objectives in Darfur, reflecting divisions among Council members regarding the exit of the mission and the achievability of these benchmarks. Although on other occasions the Council has closely tied benchmarks to measurable progress on the delivery of the mandate, the benchmarks in this case were broader.

To add to the lack of clarity, while some Council members emphasised that the mission

should withdraw by the end of the two-year period, the P3 and others said that the 2020 timeline was not absolute, and should be conditioned on success in addressing the drivers of conflict in Darfur. For example, resolution 2429, adopted on 13 July 2018, included a caveat that this timeline would be respected "provided that there is no significant change in the security situation in Darfur and key indicators are fulfilled".³⁷ These indicators are in the areas of security sector reform, the rule of law, durable solutions for displaced host communities, the immediate delivery of services for internally displaced persons, and human rights. Following the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, on 27 June resolution 2479 decided "to extend, temporarily and exceptionally, the period of drawdown for UNAMID's military personnel... in order to maintain the Mission's self-protection capacities".³⁸

The 11 December 2018 presidential statement also requested that an upcoming strategic review give particular priority to progress against the benchmarks and indicators focused on protection of civilians, particularly relating to internally displaced persons and returning refugees, human rights, rule of law, the humanitarian situation, and disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration "to help guide the Security Council's considerations on the future of UNAMID's mandate".³⁹ Addressing the different perspectives regarding benchmarks, the special report of the AU Chairperson and the Secretary-General on a strategic assessment of UNAMID proposed "that the benchmarks be streamlined to serve as long-term progress indicators, beyond the departure of UNAMID"⁴⁰ along three priority areas: political process, institution-building and long-term support to stabilisation.

The attachment to thematic issues

An ongoing Council trend is the attachment of some members to specific thematic issues, for which they become champions. This is sometimes a natural consequence of priorities that member states were advancing multilaterally before joining the Council, or

their judgment regarding the particularities of certain situations.

However, this is not always the case. In a context in which drafting is monopolised by penholders, adding language on these thematic priorities becomes a critical objective, particularly for elected members, to show impact in Council negotiations and leave a mark on legislative documents. This can also be influenced by pressure from parts of the Secretariat lobbying Council members bilaterally in pursuit of particular sectoral agendas. It is also fuelled by a not-unfounded fear that the deletion (or non-inclusion) of a certain task in a resolution may have negative consequences for the possibility of its future activation, and may be perceived as political opposition to those tasks, instead of a matter of timing and relevance. A UN official highlighted that while some may be willing to go back to basics on peace operations—politics and protection, "member states have become attached to all these bells and whistles" and are unlikely to let them go now that they "own" them.⁴¹

Presence of potential risks

A potential risk of prioritisation and sequencing is its use to deprioritise critical mission tasks that are out of favour for some member states or perceived as a nuisance by host governments, typically including human rights monitoring or rule of law-related tasks.

Some Council members have called for caution when trying to sequence and prioritise mandates. When the MINUSCA mandate was established in April 2014, it identified the priority tasks on which the mission had to focus initially. It also mandated MINUSCA and the Secretariat to start planning additional tasks "as conditions permit"⁴² including support to security sector reform and vetting processes and seizing and disposing of arms violating the arms embargo. At a 20 November 2015 meeting, Lithuania expressed concerns about the impact of MINUSCA's sequencing potentially downgrading the mission's capacity to

35 Interview by SCR and Stimson, June 2019.

36 S/PRST/2018/19, 11 December 2018, p.2

37 S/RES/2429, 13 July 2018, op.2

38 Resolution 2479, 27 June 2019, op.2

39 S/PRST/2018/19, 11 December 2018, p.2

40 S/2019/445, 30 May 2019, p.12

41 Stimson interview, June 2019

42 Resolution 2149, 10 April 2014, op.31

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support security sector reform at a time when this task “could not be more urgent”.⁴³

In the last few years some Council members have expressed frustration with peace operations, often linked to their costs, and have promoted a renewed focus on the delivery of results. During negotiations on the 2018 renewal of UNIOGBIS, the US advocated exerting pressure on the government of Guinea-Bissau by taking a hard look at the mission. In a report, the Secretary-General’s acknowledged that the political impasse continued to hinder progress in key areas of the security sector, but did not recommend changes to the mandate in this regard.⁴⁴ However, a decision was made to remove two tasks from the mission’s mandate: the provision of strategic and technical advice and support to security sector reform and rule of law strategies, and the provision of strategic and technical advice to law enforcement and criminal and penitentiary systems. In explaining the vote, a US representative stated that “[w]ith a streamlined mandate, the mission can focus even more on its good offices to help deliver an end to the stalemate”.⁴⁵

Ambiguous by design

While clarity may be presupposed as a key objective of mandating resolutions, this is not always the case. Many Council resolutions feature ambiguous language as a way of overcoming divisions among members. Instead of solving a particular issue, the Council kicks the can down the road in the hope that field actors will be able to decode the text. A December 2016 Stimson Center report argued that lack of clarity and guidance on stabilisation mandates had led MONUSCO and MINUSCA to ignore them as mission objectives altogether.⁴⁶

Ahead of the 2017 MINUSMA renewal, the Secretary-General recommended that MINUSMA enhance its support to the Malian Defence and Security Forces (MDSF) in order to accelerate their operational effectiveness and redeployment throughout the country.⁴⁷ During negotiations, there was US opposition over the financial requirements

of adding a new task to the mandate, which included asking for clarifications in a meeting of Council members under “any other business” the morning of the adoption. The final version of resolution 2364, which was unanimously adopted, preserved language from a task included in a previous resolution that spoke generally about support to the redeployment of the MDSF and incorporated a new operative paragraph outlining the precise nature of the support that MINUSMA was expected to continue to provide specifying that this would take place “within existing resources”. The Council’s ambiguity in presenting a new task as part of an old task to make it acceptable to the US, and without linking it to additional resources, went against the initial recommendation of the Secretary-General regarding the need to enhance MINUSMA support on that front.

Although ambiguity may be needed to achieve compromise under certain conditions, the Council should be clear about the overall political strategy pursued by the mission and those aspects of the resolution that are most critical to it. This could include the Council’s diagnosis of the causes of the conflict and how the mission is expected to address them. The input of the Secretariat in this process is fundamental, as is the role and expertise of the UN country team.

Shorter mandates do not mean more focused mandates

One way in which the push for more focused and achievable mandates has been pursued has been by shortening mandate resolutions. Recent streamlining efforts made by the Council (including by the UK on AMISOM and UNFICYP in 2019, and Japan on UNAMA in 2017) have mostly focused on reducing the quantity of words used to convey certain messages, without substantially modifying mandate content.

As the Council and the Secretariat undertake the effort to define parameters for the prioritisation and sequencing of mandates, a critical element will be agreeing on how much detail is helpful to have in a resolution, and how that relates to the scope

of the mandate. The question is likely to become whether making long lists of tasks more organised is sufficient, or the Council should go beyond this and discard long lists of tasks altogether, by for example focusing more on objectives, as suggested above.

Aligning the expectations on the demand-side with the plans on the supply-side

In establishing or renewing peace operations, a challenge is to arrive at a shared understanding by the Council, the Secretariat and domestic actors on the elements to prioritise or sequence. This is not easy, as these actors often pursue divergent agendas, but in the case of the Council’s engagement on Colombia, they aligned to allow the establishment of missions with clear mandates that were achievable and responded to a logical sequence agreed by the parties.

UN Missions in Colombia: A Sequenced Approach

A clear example of the sequencing of mandates was the Council’s consideration of the UN Mission in Colombia (2016-2017) and its successor, the UN Verification Mission in Colombia (2017-present). Their mandates were quite distinct, and they responded to different needs expressed by the parties during the negotiation of the peace agreement. The UN Mission in Colombia was responsible for the monitoring and verification of the laying-down of arms, and coordinated a tripartite mechanism that monitored and verified adherence to the definitive bilateral ceasefire and cessation of hostilities agreed to by the parties. Its successor, the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, is mandated to verify the implementation of several measures of the peace agreement, including the political, economic and social reincorporation of the former members of the guerrilla group Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC-EP); personal and collective security guarantees; and comprehensive programmes on security and protection measures for communities and organisations in conflict-affected areas. Following the end

43 S/PV.7564, 20 November 2015, p.20

44 S/2018/110, 9 February 2018, p.9

45 S/PV.8194, 28 February 2018, p.4

46 Gorur, Aditi, “Defining the Boundaries of UN Stabilization Missions”, Stimson Center, December 2016, p.20

47 S/2017/478, 6 June 2017, p.15

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of the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos, who spearheaded the peace talks, the UN Verification Mission has come to represent a significant guarantee of continuity and international support to the agreement where the new government's own commitment has seemed uncertain and at risk of derailing the political process. It is worth noting that the sequencing of the Colombia missions was possible largely because this approach came from the parties themselves—it was included in the 2016 peace agreement—on an issue that is also before the Council at their request.

Furthermore, both Colombia missions had a sequenced deployment. The UN Mission in Colombia was established in January 2016, when the FARC-EP and the Colombia government were in the final stretch of peace negotiations in Havana. The Council requested the Secretary-General to initiate preparations on the ground for the establishment of the mission and to present detailed recommendations regarding its size and operational aspects for the Council's consideration and approval. The recommendations included the number of unarmed observers and civilians required to fulfill the mission's role, as well as its geographical reach. They were developed by a team led by the future head of the mission, Jean Arnault, who before his appointment had already been working on behalf of the Secretary-General with the negotiating teams of the government and the FARC-EP during the peace talks. The recommendations were approved in resolution 2307, adopted on 13 September 2016. After the results of a 2 October plebiscite that rejected the peace agreement, the mandate was adjusted to focus on the verification of a ceasefire and cessation of hostilities. The monitoring and the verification of the laying down of weapons was resumed after a final agreement was endorsed by the Colombian Congress in November of that year.

Similarly, the UN Verification Mission in Colombia was authorised on 10 July 2017. This was two and a half months before it was to start operating, on 26 September 2017, immediately following the completion of the UN Mission in Colombia. As in the first mission, the Council left it to the Secretariat to present detailed

recommendations to the Council regarding the size, operational aspects and mandate of the mission. These were presented on 30 August and approved by the Council on 14 September.

Prioritisation and sequencing in the context of an exit strategy

Although it is often said that a good political strategy is also a Mission exit strategy, instead of incorporating exit strategies in its thinking from the outset, the Council habitually starts focusing on them a few years after the deployment of a peace operation. In that stage of the life-cycle of peace operations, which arrives at different moments for each, depending on several factors (such as budgetary pressure, political considerations, progress in implementing the mandate and mission-host state relations), discussions on prioritisation and sequencing are viewed in a new light.

Although exit strategy decisions are often driven by the particular interest of certain Council members influencing headquarters-heavy processes, there is often a willingness to promote some coherence in the steps to be taken. Even where a decision to draw down or transition has been made, Council members may adjust the process, if presented with relevant evidence at the right time.

An example of this dynamic is MINUSTAH's transition from a multidimensional peacekeeping operation with a substantive military component to MINUJUSTH, a smaller peace operation focused on policing and the rule of law. The Council decided explicitly to prioritise certain elements and did so based on the Secretary-General's recommendations. A 2013-2016 consolidation plan limiting the scope of the mission's activities, as the government assumed more responsibilities, became the initial basis for the reduction of MINUSTAH's operational footprint, geographical presence and civilian and uniformed staffing levels. In an August 2015 report, the Secretary-General conveyed to the Council that MINUSTAH "accorded priority to mandated activities relating to good offices, the promotion of political

dialogue and electoral assistance to ensure a peaceful political transition; the provision of operational support to the national police and technical support for the agency's development; and the strengthening of the rule of law and human rights, together with specific institution-building activities".⁴⁸ In resolution 2243 of 14 October 2015, the Council took note of the implementation of the conditions-based consolidation plan of MINUSTAH, and stated that the mission had prioritised "the mandated activities and will continue to focus its resources on priority areas, while progressively disengaging from others in coordination with the Haitian government and international partners".⁴⁹

In a context in which Council members and the Group of Friends of Haiti had differences over the timeline and the drawdown of the mission, the Secretariat essentially arbitrated the pace at which the transition would happen. In this context, however, some member states were more effective than others in influencing the Secretariat's assessments and recommendations before they reached the Council. This became more important as the Council tasked the Secretariat with conducting an in-house strategic assessment mission (SAM), which was led by the Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, to feed into the transition process. Although delayed by the fluid political situation, the SAM was eventually carried out in February 2017 and presented to the Council in March ahead of the mandate renewal in April. The assessment noted that, notwithstanding the support provided to crucial legislative reforms, "progress in the areas of rule of law and human rights had been markedly slower".⁵⁰ In order to avoid a security vacuum, the assessment proposed a gradual mission withdrawal that would permit a progressive testing of the national police's capacity to assume, over time, full responsibility for Haiti's security needs. A follow-on UN presence would also be able to exercise a strong good offices function and political engagement and avoid failures of past transitions.⁵¹ Building on the findings of the SAM, the Secretary-General recommended

48 S/2015/667, 31 August 2015, p.12

49 Resolution 2243, 14 October 2015, op. 8

50 S/2017/223, 16 March 2017, p. 11

51 The Secretary-General explicitly stated the need to avoid the security vacuum created or perceived by a sudden, complete withdrawal of the Mission's uniformed operational elements. Among the failure of past transitions, he identified the rapid decline of national police capacity, impartiality and credibility that followed the closing of the UN peacekeeping operation in Haiti in March 2000, which led to the ensuing electoral crisis and large-scale public unrest. S/2017/223, 16 March 2017, p. 12

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that the closure of MINUSTAH be accompanied by the establishment of a smaller peacekeeping operation focused on rule of law and police development.

When MINUJUSTH took over from MINUSTAH in October 2017, the Council stated that the mission would operate for two years, handing over to another type of UN presence, possibly a special political mission, thus becoming a “‘transition mission’ par excellence”.⁵² It also gave the UN a chance to leave behind the controversies that had undermined public perceptions of the operation in Haiti, notably incidents of sexual exploitation and abuse and the cholera epidemic. According to resolution 2350, MINUJUSTH was mandated to assist the government of Haiti to strengthen rule of law institutions in Haiti; support and develop the Haitian National Police (HNP), and engage in human rights monitoring, reporting and analysis. While the projected two-year timeframe for the mission was mainly driven by financial and political agendas, MINUSTAH’s police component considered that that was the time needed to consolidate the capacity of the HNP.⁵³ As planned, the mandate of MINUJUSTH ended on 15 October 2019, and the UN Integrated Office in Haiti (BINUH) started operations the next day.

THE SECRETARIAT

Difficulties of sustaining a culture of planning in the Secretariat

The Secretary-General’s input aims at providing all Council members “with a common point of departure for discussion and decision-making, identifying options for action as appropriate, coupled with a realistic appraisal of the risks and opportunities of each”.⁵⁴ To do so more systematically, in 2013 the Secretariat developed, in conjunction with UN agencies, funds and programmes, a UN-wide “Policy on Integrated Assessment and Planning” (IAP).⁵⁵ The IAP defines the

requirements for the “integrated conduct of assessments and planning in conflict and post-conflict settings where an integrated UN presence is in place or is being considered, and to outline responsibilities of UN actors in this process”.⁵⁶

Despite its potential, peace operations do not follow the IAP systematically, and the process faces significant challenges including pressure to lead to the conclusions that are deemed politically acceptable.

In early 2017, the Departments of Field Support and Peacekeeping Operations developed a Policy on Planning and Review of Peacekeeping Operations. The purpose of the planning process outlined in the policy is to ensure accurate analysis and development of solid options for the Council that are clear in terms of strategic objectives, prioritised and sequenced. The policy identifies several phases, such as the decision to monitor and assess a situation, the development of plans for peacekeeping, the monitoring of the performance of the mission, and the decision to maintain or revise plans following a review or assessment.⁵⁷

When considering changes to the mandate of a peace operation, Secretariat advice is to be informed by what is possible, which makes detailed planning around these options critical. The Policy on Planning and Review of Peacekeeping Operations acknowledges that the planning process does not cease with the completion of all major plans, but continues throughout implementation and monitoring of impact. However, Secretariat officials acknowledge the limitations of their planning capacities—chiefly, organisational culture and practice. There is low institutional buy-in for planning, and limited capacity to bolster a culture of planning as an iterative process in order to make adjustments. Even though planning tasks require not only specific skills but sufficient time to be carried out, the expectation is that planning is at least partially undertaken by staff who are actively backstopping peace operations. Some highlight the disparity between the

more developed role in planning processes played by uniformed actors, which can leave less space for civilian actors to give input upstream. That the timelines for different cycles and processes (mandate, budget, force generation, strategic reviews) do not coincide makes sound planning processes all the more difficult. In the end, the planning process, instead of first agreeing on tasks and overall direction for the mission and considering the allocation of resources, tends to become a “supply-driven” exercise framed by the resources that are likely to be available, with some of the analysis described by an interviewee as “cosmetic”.⁵⁸

UNSMIL: letting the mandate emerge from the demand-side

Before the discussions regarding the two-stage mandating process advocated by the HIPPO report, the Secretariat and the Council approached the possibility of a UN deployment in Libya with the idea of letting the priorities emerge from the ground.

Soon after the February 2011 crisis began, the Secretary-General appointed Abdel-Elah al-Khatib as his Special Envoy for Libya with a mandate to mediate between the parties to the conflict. In April 2011, Ian Martin was appointed as Special Adviser on post-conflict planning for Libya, working in parallel to al-Khatib. From early May, Martin led an integrated pre-assessment process to develop a shared understanding of the Libyan context, identify priorities and analyse potential challenges to inform subsequent planning steps in areas where UN support might prove appropriate if requested. For about three months, seven sub-groups brought together members of the Secretariat, agencies, funds and programmes, as well as the World Bank and the International Organization for Migration. After the fall of Tripoli and the flight of Muammar al-Qaddafi in August 2011, and following a request by the National Transitional Council, the Secretary-General, on the basis of the conclusions of the pre-assessment process, told the Council that his aim was to get UN personnel on the ground “as quickly as possible, under a robust Security

52 Di Razza, Namie, “Mission in Transition: Planning for the End of UN Peacekeeping in Haiti,” International Peace Institute, December 2018, p. 3

53 Ibid., p. 23

54 S/2001/394, 20 April 2001, p.8

55 The IAP Policy underwent a “light review” in 2018 and there is a process underway to review the implementation of the policy to assess whether a more fundamental revision of the policy is warranted.

56 UN Policy on Integrated Assessment and Planning, 2013, p.2, available at: https://undg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/UN-Policy-on-Integrated-Assessment-and-Planning_FINAL_9-April-2013.pdf

57 DPKO/DFS Policy on Planning and Review of Peacekeeping Operations, 2016, p.2

58 SCR interview with UN official, June 2019

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Council mandate⁵⁹ guided by the principles of national ownership, speed of response and rapid delivery, and effective coordination of international assistance. In a subsequent letter, the Secretary-General proposed the establishment of an integrated United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) for an initial period of three months, allowing for further consultations on the full scope and nature of the assistance requested from the UN. Although resolution 2009, adopted two weeks later, established UNSMIL with a mandate to assist and support Libyan national efforts on different files, the expectation was that these were just temporary and that the Secretariat would revert to the Council with more concrete recommendations. The prolongation of the conflict and the delay in the formation of the interim government prevented the level of dialogue and assessment of needs required for proper mission planning and in November 2011 the Secretary-General requested another three-month extension in the hopes of then reverting to the Council with proposals for adjustments reflecting the wishes of the interim government.⁶⁰ The Secretary-General explicitly told the Council that UNSMIL would best support Libya not by being driven “by the supply side of post-conflict assistance, but by being responsive to Libya’s own emerging sense of its needs for international support”.⁶¹ Once the interim government was sworn in and had announced its priorities, the Secretary-General proposed a one-year renewal of UNSMIL’s mandate which was heeded by the Council in resolution 2040 in March 2012. The resolution incorporated some new tasks for the mission including to support the Libyan efforts to manage the process of democratic transition (including the electoral process and the preparation of a new constitution).⁶² Ahead of the adoption, the Secretary-General had emphasised the need to prioritise the flexibility and responsiveness of the mission. According to the Secretary-General, UNSMIL was not expected to consist of large, continuously deployed sections but rather be equipped with a small core of relatively senior advisers across a range of mandate areas, and the capacities

to bring rapidly on board short-term, dedicated technical expertise when required. This could be understood as an admission that the priorities could not be predicted in great detail. Although resolution 2040 made no reference to the required flexibility for the mission, which soon faced administrative challenges, the Council proposed that it be subject to review within six months. However, given the uncertainty that followed the July 2012 elections, with several failed attempts before the General National Congress approved the appointment of Prime Minister Ali Zeidan, the Council waited until the expiry of UNSMIL’s mandate in March 2013 to adjust it to the unstable post-electoral period.

This example shows how at the critical juncture of mission startup, a sequenced approach can introduce an organising element. In the case of UNSMIL, the sequencing and the high-level emphasis on preparing the ground before engaging in mission planning responded primarily to a Secretariat decision to which Council members agreed.

This early awareness of the need to adapt the mandate to a still-evolving conflict and emerging needs continued to some degree in subsequent mandate renewals although the recrudescence of the civil war in July 2014, the emergence of rival authorities and the subsequent evacuation of UNSMIL significantly constrained the work of the mission. In March 2014 the Council identified ensuring Libya’s transition to democracy as UNSMIL’s “immediate priority”⁶³, and following the initialing of the Libyan Political Agreement in July 2015, the immediate priority became UNSMIL’s support to the Libyan political process towards the formation of a Government of National Accord and security arrangements through mediation and good offices. Other tasks, which included human rights monitoring and reporting; support for securing uncontrolled arms and support to key Libyan institutions among others, were to be undertaken “within operational and security constraints”.⁶⁴ Placing the onus on the political role of the mission and identifying other tasks as secondary has continued to this day.

Furthermore, although the Council has

expressed support for the role of UNSMIL in the stabilisation of Libya, its members have displayed significant strategic differences. Although the Security Council in December 2015 recognised the legitimacy of the Presidency Council of the Government of National Accord, several Security Council members have bilaterally supported competing institutions vying for power.

The constraints of what is “politically acceptable”

The Brahimi report criticised the Secretariat for self-censoring, and the HIPPO report recommended that the Secretariat be “frank in its assessments and not bow to concerns about what the market can bear but provide options regarding what can be achieved with varying levels of resources”.⁶⁵ Considerations regarding the acceptability by the Council of the options proposed by the Secretariat weigh heavily on the process—a refutation of a core Brahimi precept, namely frank Secretariat advice to the Council. While options need to make sense politically, Council-related political considerations are arguably given too much sway at the expense of sound and frank analysis in the Secretariat’s recommendations and clarity regarding its constraints. As an interviewee put it, “we need to have the corporate courage to say what is achievable”.⁶⁶ Another challenge inherent in organisational behaviour is self-interest—specifically, the priority of many internal actors to preserve or expand their roles.

An attempt to overcome some of these challenges was the establishment of independent reviews conducted since 2017 at the initiative of the Secretariat or the Council.⁶⁷ These included a small inter-agency team of UN staff, led by a former or current senior UN official. In most cases they included a “red team” tasked with challenging the assumptions underpinning the review in the early stages of the process. Council members have been frustrated by the limited engagement between the Council and the review teams, while the Secretariat has

59 S/PV.6606, 30 August 2011, p.2

60 S/2011/727, 22 November 2011, p.13

61 S/2012/129, 1 March 2012, p.19

62 Resolution 2040, 12 March 2012, p. 3

63 Resolution 2144, 14 March 2014, p.4

64 Resolution 2238, 10 September 2015, p.4

65 S/2015/446, HIPPO Report, 17 June 2015, p.39

66 SCR interview with UN official, July 2019

67 These reviews should not be confused with reviews/assessments carried out cyclically by the Secretariat.

Challenges to Achieve Prioritisation and Sequencing

experienced pressure from member states to shape emerging review findings. Some have also questioned whether these reviews have been utilised to impose a certain narrative regarding specific mandates against the perspectives advocated by other UN actors.

When the Secretariat pulls in different directions

Given its criticality, the Secretariat input in the mandating process can be a contributing factor to focused mandates as well as to unfocused, “Christmas-tree” mandates. Indeed, the HIPPO report pointed to Secretariat actions as a factor in the mushrooming of mandated tasks. While the input of the Secretariat as a whole is conveyed in reports of the Secretary-General, different parts of the organisation persist in “lobbying Council members for specific interests”⁶⁸ instead of rallying behind a single Secretariat position on prioritisation. This also extends to internal assessments and internally-supported independent reviews. While the Secretariat may expect clear guidance from the Council to help overcome internal debates, the Council is often itself caught up in those same dynamics in respect of lobbying efforts.

The ongoing debate about conditions for certain tasks

One of the questions that the Secretariat faces in this process is identifying the right timing for a particular mandated task. Some criticise that, in addition to its cost, deploying before conditions are ripe may prevent the mission from focusing on what is achievable within the particular time frame. An example often mentioned is how UNMISS had 99 staff posts dedicated to disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration at a time when there was no traction on this front.

However, some interviewees have countered that if peace operations are to wait until conditions are “right”, that time will never come. Budgetary practices discourage the addition of new tasks and additional resources where there has been no initial budgeting, for one thing. For another, having staff working on issues

can create momentum and drive increased action. Early mission engagement includes developing a network of key stakeholders and understanding the specificities of the programmes to be developed, as well as providing technical advice to the mission’s senior leadership to encourage the right key decisions at early stages. As a UN Secretariat official mentioned, “if you wait until there is an agreement, it will be too late”.⁶⁹

THE BUDGETARY PROCESS

“Within existing resources”, doing more with less

Peacekeeping discussions have been marked by the challenging financial environment for peace operations. This is particularly relevant regarding prioritisation and sequencing, where the different dynamics at play as operations are discussed in the Council and the Fifth Committee do not offer a coherent picture. Prioritisation and sequencing have been presented as a way of keeping costs, and mandates, manageable, by focusing on what can be achieved at any given time, but this should be set against pressure to frontload peace operations posts to make sure they are available when needed. An interviewee described how path dependency (both in the Council and the Fifth Committee) generally prevents the possibility of mission growth, after an initial mandate.⁷⁰

On occasion, this results in new priority tasks being added, without making new capabilities available, putting the mission in a difficult situation. Resolution 2448 adopted on 7 December 2018 responded to a request by the Secretary-General that MINUSCA be mandated to provide limited operational and logistical support for the CAR security forces trained by the EU Military Training Mission, under certain conditions. The resolution ended up authorising MINUSCA to enhance planning, technical assistance and limited logistical support for redeployment of these units, within the confines of the request of the Secretary-General and in accordance with the UN Human Rights Due Diligence Policy,

while stating that these are to be carried out by reallocating approved resources.⁷¹

Renegotiating mandates?

Although the Council authorises the deployment of peacekeeping operations, how this decision translates into field-level implementation is heavily influenced by negotiations in the Fifth Committee of the General Assembly, which is responsible for administrative and budgetary matters. Every year in May-June, the committee adopts the budget of peacekeeping operations, with effect from 1 July. The budgets are based on proposals from the Secretary-General and are first considered by the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions (ACABQ), which holds hearings and makes recommendations to the Fifth Committee. The process can, in the words of one staff member, “squeeze” the mandated tasks of a particular mission, given the level of detail (post by post) considered by the committee and the ACABQ, but not eliminate them. The staffing tables approved by the General Assembly formally limit the capacity of missions to make changes, but in practice, there is some flexibility to adapt, if justifications are provided.

Although the lack of coordination between the Council and the Fifth Committee brings a degree of dysfunctionality, this separation may be intentional. Some Council members prefer to let things go in the Council, knowing that the Fifth Committee will provide an opportunity to adjust the emphasis given to aspects of the mandate with much less visibility.

Although it is unusual for Council briefers to raise the impact of budgetary decisions on their ability to lead on the implementation of mandates, a rare example of this took place after the new MONUSCO budget was adopted. At \$1.11 billion, the 2018-2019 approved budget for MONUSCO was a full \$38.8 million less than the Secretary-General’s proposal, and \$32 million below the ACABQ recommendation. On 26 July 2018, MONUSCO head Leila Zerrougui told the Council that the budgetary reduction “further compounds the impact

68 S/2015/446, HIPPO Report, 17 June 2015, p.60

69 SCR interview with a UN official, June 2019

70 SCR interview, June 2019

71 S/RES/2448, 7 December 2018, op.40.a), (iv) and (v).

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on our operational ability following last year's budget cuts. I do not mention that to make a plea for more resources; we all know the new financial reality facing all peacekeeping missions. I highlight it because it is important that we collectively understand that while MONUSCO's resources continue to shrink, its mandate remains the same and expectations only continue to grow".⁷²

Many stakeholders raise the limitations of the budgeting process as a clear obstacle to improving the mandating process. The sequenced approach described by HIPPO in which a first bare bones mission would be deployed rapidly and, as needs emerge, inform changes to the mandate, runs counter to existing budgetary dynamics. Many member states and Secretariat officials argue that the moment of the establishment of a new peace operation is the moment at which to get in place the assets (posts) they care about, not necessarily because of what can be done in that first year, but because if they are

not frontloaded, the mission will lack capacity to act later, when the situation becomes more conducive. When an initial budget is approved, the expectation is that it will be the ceiling, save a shock, and an upward adjustment will be difficult for money-conscious member states to swallow. Just as with mandating resolutions, the fact that the basis for budgetary discussions is the prior year's budget further reinforces this dynamic. As the HIPPO report put it, "the presentation and review of mission budgets is overly focused on reviewing incremental annual variations across budget lines, particularly on staff posts, rather than on the strategic drivers of cost and on results".⁷³

The delegation of greater authority to the field, which is part of the Secretary-General's management reform effort and became effective on 1 January 2019, is likely to have a positive impact on the process of developing budget proposals and reallocating resources based on changing conditions on the ground.

However, other constraining elements, such as how long it takes for missions to recruit professional staff, are likely to continue to encourage the frontloading of positions.

Changing the structure of the budgetary process would be extremely difficult, but there are practical steps that could be taken to facilitate efforts to prioritise and sequence mandates. For example, if budget proposals were to be accompanied by a three-year projection of possible conflict or post-conflict evolution, with different scenarios, budgets could be compared against the projection for that year instead of the previous year's budget, breaking with some of the dynamics that prevent the adjustment of budgets to new realities. This would be an opportunity to have a longer-term perspective, particularly if accompanied by multi-year strategies by the Council as mentioned above.

Ideas to overcome existing challenges

A high degree of inertia in the Council, the reluctance of the Secretariat to be frank about its limitations and to line up behind key recommendations, and an overly bureaucratic budgetary process are likely to continue to undermine efforts to prioritise and sequence mandates. Below are some recommendations that do not require radical changes and have the potential to facilitate the emergence of more strategic and coherent thinking about mandates.

FOR THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Recommendation 1:

The Council progressively shifts its focus in mandating from tasks to objectives.

If mandates were to focus on defining strategic objectives rather than delineating tasks, this would allow the Secretariat and the missions on the ground to have more flexibility in defining what is needed at any given time.

This change of mindset could put the onus for prioritisation and sequencing partially on the Secretariat and the mission, which could decide how best to reach the stated objectives including through benchmarking exercises.

Although no current mandate may be a good example of this, there have been attempts to develop streamlined objective-driven mandates. The current 3-page mandate of UNAMI establishes that the mission shall prioritise the provision of advice, support and assistance to the government and people of Iraq on advancing inclusive, political dialogue and national and community-level reconciliation.⁷⁴ It then includes other mandated areas, arguably falling into the category of tasks rather than objectives, however.

Peacekeeping mandating resolutions in the past were often broad endorsements of the proposal laid out in the Secretary-General's report, but this practice was discontinued in the late 1990s. As the Council started to get

more specific on its mandating resolutions, with the establishment of MINURCA in 1998, it shifted the focus to tasking rather than setting up general objectives, which developed further with the evolution of multidimensional peacekeeping.

Recommendation 2:

Council members hold strategic discussions with the Secretariat on the overall direction of peace operations before starting to negotiate the text of mandates and renewals.

The trend towards ballooning mandates is influenced by negotiation dynamics in the Council, the limited insight of Council members into how mandates are implemented and the dictates of the budgetary process. In mandating, path dependency and inertia, also driven by time pressures, may contribute to the Council continuing to task the mission with roles it is unable to execute for political reasons.

⁷² S/PV.8318, 26 July 2018, p.4

⁷³ S/2015/446, HIPPO Report, 17 June 2015, p.97

⁷⁴ Resolution 2470, 21 May 2019, op.2(a)

Ideas to overcome existing challenges

Despite calls to ensure that mandates are realistic and achievable, Council members currently do not have much motivation, or some may argue, the tools, to decide which issues should be prioritised and when, on the basis of impartial needs assessments as well as the existence of the political space to carry out such tasks in host countries. These inputs should take the form of clear Secretariat guidance.

Recommendation 3:

If an objectives-based mandate is unachievable, that Council members avoid, to the extent possible, identifying too many categories as priorities. When everything is a priority, nothing is a priority.

Several mandating resolutions differentiate between priority and other tasks. In the case of MINUSMA, the tasks under the category of “other” include quick impact projects and support to sanctions committees. Missions are also expected to report back on the implementation of “other” tasks, as well as on the “priority tasks”, calling into question what difference this distinction makes.

Instead of a binary distinction between priority and other tasks, Council members could rank mandated areas so it is clear the importance that they assign to each of them. In the absence of a mandating process which focuses more on objectives, this would at least clarify the Council’s asks. Furthermore, through its resolutions, the Council could make more explicit reference to its expectations regarding implementation of the tasks it authorises, primarily those it prioritises, but also those to which it assigns a lesser importance, and whether resources can be shifted away from them.

When planning to take a hard look at mandates, the Council could specifically request the Secretariat, or an independent review, to provide recommendations regarding which areas the mission should prioritise and how they should be sequenced. This would promote decisions based on a frank assessment of needs identified in the host country, the capabilities of the mission and the political space available, or needed, to achieve results.

Recommendation 4:

While still mandating peace operations for their usual duration of 6–12 months, the Council endorses the broad vision for the strategic direction of the mission over the next three years. This can be updated periodically.

There is often a discrepancy between the mandating cycles imposed by the Council (which range from 6 months to a year) and the expectation of what has to be achieved by then, and the rhythm of critical processes in the host countries. In order to balance what is achievable in the short-term with the general trajectory in the medium-term, it is important for the Council to keep in mind a vision that goes beyond the expiry of the current mandate. This vision, or frame of reference, can be devised with input from field-level processes (such as the Integrated Strategic Framework) which include UN agencies, funds and programmes.

Generally, the Council articulates a vision beyond the current mandate when facing an exit/transition, such as illustrated by recent examples in Liberia, Haiti and Darfur. However, nothing prevents the Council to take that longer-term perspective at other moments of the lifecycle of peace operations.

Recommendation 5:

The multi-year frame of reference could commit to authorising certain elements of the mandate when they are deemed necessary by the Secretary-General in order to be activated at the right time, making unnecessary the frontloading of posts.

This frame of reference would entail the development by the Council of a common vision for the strategic direction of the mission over the next few years. It would not be set in stone and could still be adjusted as needs arise or upon changes proposed by the Secretariat or Council members. This frame of reference could commit to authorising certain elements of the mandate when they are deemed necessary by the Secretary-General in order to be activated at the right time, making unnecessary the frontloading of posts. This could be akin to a dashboard where switches can be turned on and off as the situation evolves, according to a plan that is regularly revised. It could introduce

elements of conditionality that could support sustaining the engagement of the parties on critical processes. The mode of activation could include a Secretariat decision, an exchange of letters or a short, focused resolution. In order to allow for the potential expansion of budgets and personnel, small teams could be deployed initially, possibly in an advisory capacity, as nuclei for key mandated areas.

Recommendation 6:

Council members exercise restraint in systematically advocating for certain specific issues.

The report has described the attachment of some Council members to specific issues, adding to mandate inflation. Combined with other improvements in the mandating process, including agreement on multi-year strategies and a better understanding of operational considerations, Council members exercising restraint is critical in reining in an inflationary mandate trend.

A workaround would involve re-examining just how explicit the language needs to be to secure support for the mission leadership (to receive guidance, allocate resources, identify priorities, interact with local stakeholders) as well as to headquarters, including the budgetary process. In this context, a UN official highlighted the need to get away from “folks needing to see everything reflected”, and advocated for broader mandates with less specificity and detail.⁷⁵ More general language, as long as implicit references remain clear, can contribute towards more streamlined mandates and more nimble missions. In order to prevent undermining those agendas, Council members would have to engage with the Secretariat and mission leadership in devising the right balance between explicit and implicit language in mandates.

Recommendation 7:

The Council more routinely considers invoking different tools linked to mandate implementation—including benchmarks, visiting missions, diplomatic démarches and sanctions.

⁷⁵ Off-the-record presentation by a UN official, IPI, September 2019

Ideas to overcome existing challenges

In order to overcome the “adopt and forget” mentality, Council members could use the different tools at its disposal as levers in furtherance of its political objectives and the mandated areas to which it attaches the greatest importance. For example, two visiting missions to Mali carried out by the Council before the MINUSMA mandate renewal in March 2016 and March 2019 were instrumental in increasing the focus of the mandate renewals on the situation in the centre of the country.

Benchmarks and indicators provide an opportunity for mission senior leadership, the Secretariat and the Council to assess systematically the evolution of a peace operation and, eventually, the conditions required for a sensible exit strategy. As a result of its increasing frustration with the limited implementation of the 2015 Peace and Reconciliation Agreement in Mali, the Council identified several areas where it expected progress. In 2018 and 2019, the Council linked the potential sanctioning of individuals and entities undermining the stability of Mali with lack of progress on these issues.

Another mechanism that could be revisited in connection with mandating and the implementation of mandates is the use of Groups of Friends. Learning from historical examples and the current limitations of the few Groups of Friends that still discuss draft resolutions (on Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Haiti and Western Sahara), this mechanism could be rethought to include regional actors, particularly engaged Council members, and other member states, or neutral actors, that could be mobilised in support of political solutions.

FOR THE SECRETARIAT

Recommendation 8:

The Secretariat states clearly its conflict analysis and articulates a strategic vision of broad inputs that would support the resolution of the conflict, albeit not in an overly-detailed way.

In advising the Council, the Secretariat could present a multi-year frame of reference for

the operation anticipating the needs of the host country and the projected adjustments over time. This frame of reference, which ideally would be endorsed by the Council, would present a theory of change that states clearly the conflict analysis on which the Council is basing its assumptions and how the mandate can support the resolution of the conflict. This would require the Secretariat to be more proactive in carrying out the analytical and consultative work needed to define a strategic vision that can then be endorsed by the Council. This would mean a departure from current practice, which involves the presentation of options ahead of the imminent mandate renewal without much longer-term perspective except for in the event of transitions. In the case of Liberia, for example, the Secretary-General, following the deployment of a technical assessment mission in February 2012, acknowledged “the fragility of the prevailing peace” but recommended that UNMIL be reconfigured “on the basis of a gradual drawdown strategy, with reductions commensurate to the building of national capacity”.⁷⁶ Among other recommendations, he proposed partial repatriation of the military component in three phases within the next three years, by July 2015. Already then, the Secretary-General announced that after the three-year drawdown was completed, he recommended a comprehensive assessment to develop recommendations for the future of UNMIL and options for a possible successor presence “on the basis of the situation in the country as well as progress achieved in building national capacity to maintain peace and security”.⁷⁷ The Council endorsed this three-year framework in resolution 2066, which also authorised the Secretary-General to implement its first-year phase.

Some may argue that ambiguity from the Secretariat’s side can be useful in maintaining the political space for the mission’s work vis-à-vis domestic and international stakeholders, including Council members. However, a degree of political courage is required if the Council is to have a candid discussion about the expectations for a particular peace

operation, at least behind closed doors. This can also allow the mandating process to give the senior leadership of a peace operation political cover as it takes up problematic issues locally and internationally.

Recommendation 9:

The Secretariat is clear in the openings and limitations it identifies, whether as a result of political imperatives or budgetary reasons, avoiding self-censorship to the extent possible.

Among the main questions raised in the course of this review, most by Secretariat officials, was the intended audience of the prioritisation and sequencing efforts and its main drivers. They raised concerns regarding mandate-shaping initiatives disconnected from operational considerations with mostly budgetary motivations, both for short-term cuts and the overall trajectory of the operation. In that regard, the role of the Secretariat in proposing sound options becomes paramount. The expectation is that the Secretariat will, within the realm of what is politically feasible, be able to engage with international and national stakeholders (including the host government and civil society) in order to make sure that mandate priorities reflect the need of those whom the operations are supposed to serve. This is the case in particular when Council members have opposing views, which calls for an active role of the Secretariat in proposing what is best for the mission and the fulfillment of its objectives in order to prevent Council divisions from setting the operation up for failure. While political pressure to toe the line of particular Council members may be exerted, it is up to the Secretariat to develop frank advice to the Council, and to place that advice largely on the record. Although Council members may decide not to endorse the optimal option, the political cost of this is raised by the fact that at least it is officially presented to the Council and not discarded upstream. Further opportunities to revive optimal mandating may yet arise down the road.

⁷⁶ S/2012/230, 16 April 2012, p.12

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.17

Ideas to overcome existing challenges

FOR THE COUNCIL AND THE SECRETARIAT

Recommendation 10:

The Council specifically requests the Secretariat to provide ongoing feedback on areas of highest priority and reflections on sequencing, and discusses with the Secretariat and the mission's senior leadership language in the mandate that would be most helpful to the work of the mission in order to adapt it as the conflict evolves.

There is no common assessment of how much detail facilitates the implementation of a Council mandate, or when detail becomes a hindrance. When asked about additions that would be helpful in the mandate ahead its renewal, one head of mission said: "I can work with what I have".⁷⁸ There needs to be a balance between detail in the expectations from the Council and flexibility in the hands of senior leadership. Details incorporated in the resolution may be perceived in-country as a sign of the attention with which the situation is followed by the Council, and mission leadership can use the mandate to press for implementation by the parties. On the other hand, details that Council members may include in a resolution may not be considered as relevant to the tactical and operational priorities of the mission, may be better left to the mission, or may inadvertently undermine the mission's priorities.

A senior leader of another UN peace operation suggests that the right balance between detail and flexibility may also be connected to the lifespan of a peace operation. Whereas mandates can afford to leave space for more flexibility at the beginning of their deployment, as time passes, it is important that expectations be as specific and detailed as possible so as all actors involved (the mission, the parties and others) know the elements against which the Council will assess progress. In this context, adding references to benchmarks and reporting requirements, as in the case of the MINUSMA renewals in 2018 and 2019,

could be a way to promote accountability without micromanaging the mission.

Recommendation 11:

While the focus of the Council remains at the strategic level to avoid micromanagement, field feedback is critical to the mandating process. The Council and the Secretariat work together to increase awareness of the operational implications of Council decisions through informal meetings on country-specific and thematic agenda items, to which field-based actors are invited.

A key dimension to consider in the design of mandates is how field advice is incorporated into the options put in front of the Council by the Secretariat and how the Council interacts with field-based actors. Part of the disconnect between mandates and reality could be addressed by the decision-makers being more aware of the impact of their decisions in the work of UN missions on the ground.

The role of the Secretariat, in close consultation with the field mission, in preparing rigorous options that are based on operational considerations (including a conflict analysis, the needs on the ground and the sequencing of priorities, as well as the availability of capabilities at large) is critical.

As discussed above, an increased awareness of the operational dimension of mandate implementations may have no significant impact in decisions often based predominantly on political and budgetary considerations. However, when the input coming from the UN, both headquarters and the field, goes in the same direction, the advice can be difficult for Council members to ignore.

A related issue is the balancing act that the Secretariat has to make in devising options that put the needs of the host country front and centre, that do not unnecessarily endanger UN personnel and that are politically realistic. On occasion, the Secretariat is perceived as too deferential towards the interest of particular Council members, which undermines its standing and the mediation role that it can play in the

context of divisions among key stakeholders, including Council members.

IN THE BUDGETARY PROCESS

Recommendation 12:

Budget proposals are accompanied by a three-year budget projection, based on clear assumptions.

Ten years ago, the New Horizon report highlighted that the sequencing of mandates "will only work if there is a clear indication from the Security Council and budgetary committees that resources for the second phase of deployment will be made available".⁷⁹ In order to avoid the risk of partial mandate implementation, this exercise needs to be accompanied by longer-term planning and, as operations evolve, "flexibility in assessing and adapting the balance of capabilities within and across military, police and civilian components of the mission".⁸⁰ The actors involved in the budgetary process could then also approach the funding of tasks with the understanding that budgets will be adapted to the evolution of mission priority areas.

If budgets incorporate a three-year projection, they could then be compared against the projection for that year instead of the previous year's budget, breaking with some of the dynamics that will prevent the upward adjustment of budgets to new realities.

78 Off-the-record presentation by a UN senior official, SCR, February 2019

79 A New Partnership Agenda. Charting a New Horizon for UN Peacekeeping, July 2009, p.19

80 Ibid., p.19

Conclusion

Although there are examples of increased rhetorical emphasis on prioritisation and sequencing since 2015, including in member state statements, and some attempts by penholders to pursue this in practice, results have been mixed. The question of how prioritisation and sequencing can become a vehicle for more effective mandating, moreover, merits continued review.

The Council has used “prioritisation” to describe almost all the typically-mandated tasks in peacekeeping operations as priority as well as to establish a given mission’s one or two main strategic priorities. “Sequencing”, for its part, has often been mentioned in the context of phased mission startups or transitions. It has been used both when UN peace operations have been deployed with a limited mandate at first, to be expanded by the Council at a later stage, and when UN peace operations have taken over responsibilities from regional actors.

These two terms run a further risk of being conflated with several other concepts now associated with better mandating, such as “clear”, “focused”, “realistic” and “achievable” mandates. For the meanings of prioritisation and sequencing to be better understood and shared by the policy-making community, a shared definition is desirable among the Secretariat, the Council and member states. While ambiguity can be a useful tool for the Secretariat and the Council, arguably ambiguity in mandating can contribute to widening the gap between expectations and reality, leading to a blame game that distracts from a candid discussion of implementation challenges. This report proposes elements of a definition for both concepts that revolve around the notion of clear strategic direction, focus on a limited number of tasks and the anticipated inclusion of revised priorities based on the evolution of the situation at hand.

In addition to agreeing on a definition, a critical element in approaching prioritisation and sequencing will remain the tension between operational requirements and political acceptability. Examples in this report show the disconnect between some political decisions (including financial factors) and the consideration of the needs of peace operations and the societies in which they are deployed.

The structures at play in the current mandating system can undermine prospects for real change. Both mandating and budget resolutions use as their basis the prior year’s

resolutions, which while arguably efficient, contributes to the weight of legacy and inertia, as previously agreed elements may not adequately reflect the evolution of the conflict. Sufficient flexibility in reacting to recent developments can contribute to more effective peace operations. A multi-year framework where the Council commits to authorising certain elements of the mandate upon the request of the Secretary-General could contribute to expanding the timeframe of the mandates it adopts, assuaging somewhat the sense of having to frontload mandates. At present, there are lingering concerns that some necessary components will not be authorised or funded at a later stage in operations.

Most efforts to prioritise and sequence mandates originate in the Secretariat, which highlights its critical role in framing Council discussions. In this context, incorporating a well-understood “prioritising and sequencing lens” to the internal process should be used to guide a genuinely strategic discussion, while also cutting through turf considerations. Some of the lessons learned from the independent reviews of peace operations carried out since 2017, such as the incorporation of red teams, can contribute to improve the advice that the Secretariat provides to the Council regarding mandates.

As the Secretariat delivers on its commitment to propose to the Council parameters for the sequencing and prioritisation of mandates, it will be critical to agree on these definitions, devise ways to overcome structural challenges and promote the emergence of clearer and more end-state oriented strategic thinking.

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